

FEBRUARY 2022



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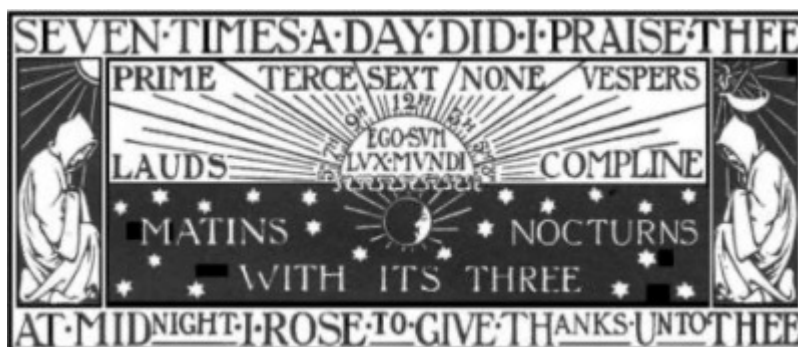
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The Evangel

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

It seems that we only just celebrated Christmas, but here we are already halfway through Epiphanytide! Lent is just around the corner, and I have been reflecting on prayer, particularly my own practices of prayer. I think it can be helpful to periodically revisit our practice of prayer, to see if what we are doing is bearing fruit, or to discern if we are being called to something new. However, that is not to say that we should not endure a practice that we initially find to be challenging, because there is a difference between *being challenged* and *not being spiritually fed*. Sometimes the difference can be subtle, but speaking from my own experience, practices that I initially found to be challenging, or even a drudgery, ended up becoming cornerstones in my relationship with Christ. So, I offer two spiritual practices you may wish to consider for your own observance of Lent, as well as a few reasons why they have stood the test of time and have been beneficial to generations of Christians.



Naturally, the first practice that I would commend is the Daily Office, and of the prayer practices I will comment on it is the one with the most 'moving parts.' The Office is one of the greatest treasures of the Anglican tradition, and Thomas Cranmer's redaction of the cumbersome Roman Divine Office was nothing short of a stroke of genius. At the time of the English Reformation, the Divine Office was such a complicated web of conflicting feast days of differing orders of solemnity, it would have taken more time to know what prayers to say and which feast to observe than to pray the Office itself. That is not to say that there is not a learning curve to praying the '79, however, it is much simpler than it seems. The best 'how-to' guide that I have come across is a short [two-page introduction created by the Society of St. Nicholas Ferrar](#), which is a relatively new devotional society dedicated to promoting the Daily Office. But why pray the Office? Personally, I think there are many reasons to consider taking up this practice, but I would point to two main reasons.

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The first reason is that the Daily Office exposes us to large chunks of Scripture over the course of the liturgical year. As I have prayed the Office off and on over the years, I have been grateful for the breadth of Scripture to which I have been exposed, particularly from the Old Testament. The Office is not necessarily structured for deep Bible study, but one might be surprised at how much the stories that one is exposed to sink into the soul. And as we go through the liturgical seasons, the different biblical themes associated with them come more into focus and can enrich our observance. Above all, the Daily Office exposes us to the entirety of the Psalter, the ‘prayer book’ of Jesus himself. The Psalms express the full range of human experience and emotion, from the heights of ecstatic joy to the depths of sorrow, anger, and pain. Walter Bruggemann wrote that, “The Psalms are an assurance to us that when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage. Rather, we are expected to submit it openly and trustingly so that it can be brought to eloquent and passionate speech addressed to the Holy One.”¹ In praying the Psalms, we are invited to approach God humbly and honestly in prayer as the complicated and contradictory people that he already knows us to be, which can be an incredibly freeing act.

The second reason that I would suggest the Daily Office is due to its objectivity: all faithful recitation of the Office requires is that we just simply do it. Like any form of liturgical prayer, it provides a bedrock of prayer that does not solely rest on how we feel, which can be in constant flux on any given day. We are given a stable and balanced structure of praise, Scripture reading, and intercession for ourselves and others. This is true just as much for the Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families as it is the full Office (BCP 136). Whether in its shortened or ‘regular’ form, the Office can serve as an anchor when it feels like every other aspect of our lives is falling apart. It can sustain us when we are feeling spiritually dry or completely and utterly uninspired. When we do not feel like praying, or when we just do not have the words, we can rely on the Office. In it we are given the words that millions of Christians across the globe have prayed for millennia. We are connected to them in each other. In that way, praying the Office is a fundamentally corporate act, and unites us to the one prayer of the Church.



The second practice I would commend is praying with Scripture, or *lectio divina* as it is called in the tradition. In comparison to the Daily Office, the entire object of this practice is a deep dive into a short text of Scripture, or even some other spiritual writing, such as writings of the saints, sayings of the Desert Fathers, or perhaps even poetry. However, it is worth saying that the regular exposure to Scripture in the Eucharist and Daily Office can prepare our minds and hearts to a more fruitful *lectio* experience. As most things in the spiritual life, all things are interconnected. When considering this form of devotion ancient Christian writers would often use the image of a cow chewing its cud. In *lectio* one ruminates on whatever text is being used that day, to hear what God is saying to them through it. The beautiful thing about this practice is that it is not an esoteric practice for monks or mystics, but is accessible for all people, especially with all the various Lenten devotionals and daily readings, including the Episcopal Church’s own ‘Day by Day.’ If one goes that route, the pressure of choosing a daily reading is negated.

Traditionally, *lectio divina* has been understood in four stages: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation)². The important thing to understand is that these stages are just a framework and many people (including myself) have gotten hung up on doing all the steps ‘correctly.’ They are not necessarily a progression of four discrete movements, for instance, meditation and prayer can be intertwined. Following ‘the steps’ is not the point of *lectio*, but rather preparing ourselves for an encounter with the Divine Word himself.



We begin by reading our chosen text, slowly. One may even want to read our selection several times to get a feel for it, but that may not be necessary every time. If one is in a group, it can be beneficial to have different voices read the text aloud, each giving their own points of emphasis. Whenever one comes across a particular word or phrase that jumps off the page, stop and sit with it. This is when reading transitions into meditation, and we begin to ask questions. What is it about this word or phrase that calls out to me? What strikes my imagination, or is there something going on in my life that connects me to a particular feeling or character?

Above all, what is God communicating to me through this word or phrase? In meditation, it is the Spirit who unearths thoughts, feelings, and experiences that connect us to the text, and it is a process that can take some time.

However, whenever we receive what God has brought to our attention through the text, out of that mix of thoughts and feelings comes prayer. We may engage in a conversation with God, in which we speak aloud our thoughts and feelings, or perhaps ask questions for guidance or strength. We may be moved to praise, or intercession on behalf of others. We may even be moved to penitence for our flaws and shortcomings. It can range anywhere from a brief and short response, to a lengthy pouring out of thought and emotion. From here, it can go a number of different, yet equally valid, ways. We can return to step one of reading, beginning the whole process over again, or there are times in which at the end of our prayer, we feel that things have come to a natural close, at least for now, or we transition to the fourth stage, contemplation.

In France, there was an old farmer who came to the church where St. John Vianney was pastor, and he sat in the church every day seemingly doing nothing. One day, St. John approached the man and asked him what it was that the old man did whenever he came to the church. The man responded, “Nothing. I look at him, and he looks at me.” That is contemplation. It is a complete rest and peace in the presence of God, and it is an experience that is not always available to us at the end of *lectio*. However, it is worth saying again that there is no one ‘right’ way of doing *lectio*. In the end, all that matters is that we have encountered Christ.

Prayer is the lifeblood of every Christian, and what I have offered for your consideration this upcoming Lenten season are only two of the countless practices one could try. I hope that they will be helpful for some, but if it does not speak to you, that is ok! It is not *how* we pray that is of the utmost importance, but rather *that* we pray. Rowan Williams wrote that it is in prayer that

*“[our] vision is clarified; [our] actions are gradually disciplined; the divine life slowly transforms [us]; and...we move into a condition where ‘The whole of our life says, Our Father.’”*³

May we all have a blessed Lenten season and grow evermore to close to Christ, who continually gives of himself to us, that we may grow to share in his divine life.

~ Fr. Ashton Sims

1 Walter Bruggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, pg. 14.

2 <https://www.conceptionabbey.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/lectio-divina-card.pdf>

3 Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, pg. 70.

LOOKING AHEAD

MARCH 1	Shrove Tuesday & Burning of the Palms
MARCH 2	Ash Wednesday: Imposition of Ashes, 6:30 a.m., 12:10 p.m., 7 p.m.
MARCH 6	First Sunday of Lent
MARCH 19	Feast day of St. Joseph, Morning Prayer (YouTube, pre-recorded video)
MARCH 25	The Annunciation of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Blessed Virgin Mary: Eucharist, Rite I, 12 p.m.
APRIL 10	Palm Sunday, 7:45 a.m. & 10 a.m.
APRIL 11-12	Holy Eucharist, 11:30 a.m., St. Alban's Chapel; Stations of the Cross 6 p.m.
APRIL 13	Holy Eucharist, 11:30 a.m., St. Alban's Chapel; Tenebrae, 7 p.m.
APRIL 14	Maundy Thursday Service with Foot Washing, Stripping of the Altar
APRIL 14-15	Maundy Thursday to Good Friday Garden of Repose Vigil + Livestream
APRIL 15	Good Friday: Seven Last Words 12 p.m. to 3 p.m.; Good Friday Liturgy, 7 p.m.
APRIL 16	Holy Saturday 9 a.m. service, St. Alban's Chapel; Great Easter Vigil 7 p.m.
APRIL 17	Easter Sunday: 8:30 a.m. & 11 a.m. Festal Choral Eucharists; 10 a.m. Easter Egg Hunt
APRIL 18-22	Easter Week Holy Eucharists, St. Alban's Chapel
MAY 1	Bishop Brian Cole visits St. Stephen's, Confirmations

February Celebrations

BIRTHDAYS

2/2 Adam Ballintoy
2/5 Jaime Burnham
2/7 Rob Steele
2/8 Kathie Shearer
Caleb Justice
2/9 Parker Stanley
Mary Petersen
2/10 Elizabeth Botica
2/12 Adolf King
2/13 Fiona Yearwood
2/14 Eileen Hartley
2/15 Mary Jeanne French
2/16 Katherine Etheridge
David Felton
2/17 Brent Sigmon
2/19 Dan DiGregorio
Audrey Henry
2/21 Carol King
2/22 Carol Skyberg
2/23 Joe McGrory
2/25 Charles Jones
2/26 Nathan Kruzic
Cammie Owens

ANNIVERSARIES

2/6 Linda & Lew Felton
2/18 Mary Nell & Jack Campbell
2/20 Kathy Moore & Dan Tuxbury
2/22 Jamie & Ed LaRose



Where God is seen, love is felt, lives are changed!

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